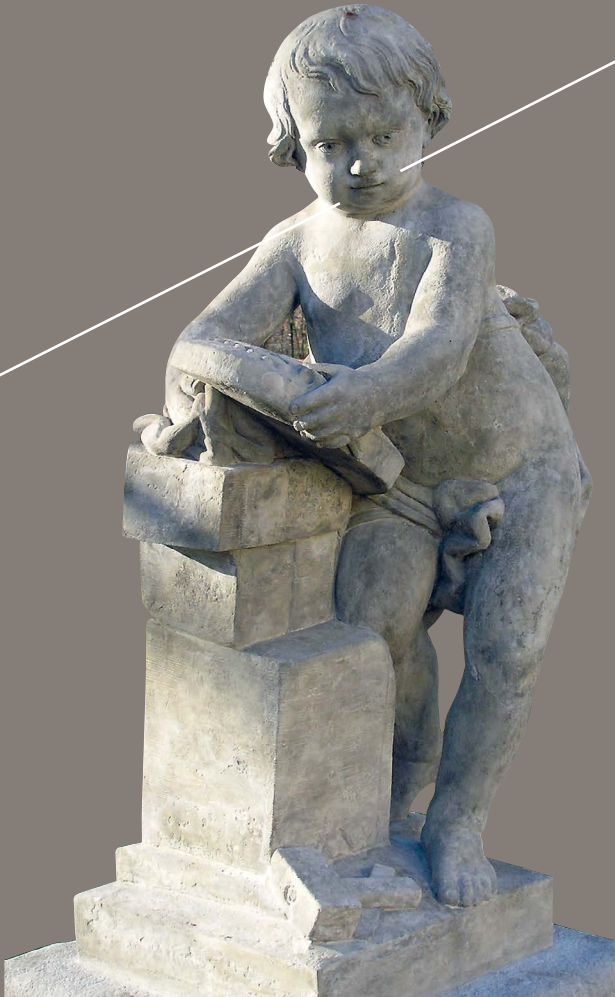


Rhetoric in European Culture and Beyond



KAROLINUM

Jiří Kraus

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF RHETORIC – A MOTIONLESS HISTORY?

The content of rhetorical formulas, the normal method of their arrangement and the terminology used have not changed substantially for over two and a half thousand years. The path man has taken from the theme of speech to its acoustic and written representation has also remained unchanged. In September 1416, after an intensive search which enlivened their participation in the Council of Constance, Humanists Poggio Bracciolini, Cincio Romano and Bartolomeo Montepulciano discovered the manuscript of the complete version of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (Institutes of Oratory) in the Abbey of St. Gall's dark cellar. This manuscript, which was more than thirteen-hundred years old, became for them and their contemporaries not only a source of knowledge about the admired past, but also a highly prestigious source on the norms of contemporary literary language. A similar situation also occurred one hundred years later when Bishop Gerardo Landriani found Cicero's dialogue *De oratore* (On the Orator) among ancient manuscripts in the north-Italian city of Lodi, a text which had until then been known only in an incomplete and distorted version. The discovery was immediately followed by a wave of Ciceronianism, which resulted in numerous commentaries on Cicero as well as in the production of Cicero-inspired handbooks cultivating the language and style of the cultural elite of the time. Umberto Eco, a representative of modern semiotics, attributes an even longer span of norm-setting influence to Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. Eco cites many theoretical and artistic works along with movements in modern linguistics and literary criticism which are "Aristotelian in their spirit, aims, results, and ambiguities."¹ The listed sources include Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*, Warren and Wellek's *Theory of Literature*, Russian Formalism, the Prague School, New Criticism, the Chicago School and motifs in Joyce's artistic work.

Rhetoric's defiance of change throughout history is not only due to the unexpected appearance of canonical works of Greek and Roman antiquity, representing radically different historical and cultural contexts, however,

what is even more striking is the unchanged format of rhetoric textbooks, which have solidified over centuries. They lack original ideas, repeating the same phrases, examples, anecdotes. In his *La Rhétorique, ou les Règles de l'éloquence* (1730), Balthasar Gilbert, a teacher of rhetoric in Mazarin College at the University of Paris, proudly announces that he is not presenting unproven rules, but that instead he follows the steps of classical authors, such as Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian (*Nous ne promettons donc pas ici des Règles que personne n'ait encore donné: au contraire, nous faisons gloire de ne suivre, en cette matière, que les traces des Anciens*).

The difference between rhetoric textbooks thus generally lies in accentuating different elements of exposition. The sum of these differences, in fact, demonstrates an apparent shift through history. Rhetoric as a practical set of instructions for effective communication is interspersed with the reflections of contemporary philosophers and thinkers focusing on linguistic and literary style, the logic of the line of reasoning, the psychology of persuasion, and the education of future intellectuals, politicians, advocates and officials. Rhetoric teaches us how to compose texts as well as how to understand both contemporary and historical literature, how to understand the norms which determine the process of language stylization. Over the course of its long history, rhetoric has ceased to be merely a language about a language (a metalanguage) of exclusively public speeches delivered in political gatherings or before the court, and has changed into a metalanguage of stages in the development of culture and civilization. It has thus become the key to interpreting texts, works of art, communication activities and to understanding the principles of communication in general.

The very role of the cultural metalanguage, however, is itself subject to change. The strategies essential to rhetoric's art of "composing an effective and appropriate speech or a written work" were applied wherever style as a set method of choosing and organizing means of expression using a particular repertoire (words, colours, shapes, tones) was essential. Some strategies and rules came to existence in the democracies of antiquity and in imperial Rome, others in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, baroque, classical eras and yet others have been brought about in the present time. Giorgio Vasari, an Italian mannerist and arts historian, added that this set of rules also contains licences, intentional exceptions from the rules and deformations.

The process of accepting or rejecting rhetoric textbooks displays considerably greater developmental dynamics than their form and organiza-

tion. Philosophy, science, school and, last but not least, the legal systems which have since the 17th century in most European countries gradually replaced direct confrontation between the plaintiff and the defendant with an elaborate system of evidence procedure, have changed their rational and evaluation attitudes towards rhetoric. The identification of 14th–16th-century humanist principles with rhetoric is simultaneously being replaced by rationalist efforts to free the thinking subject from the hindrances laid in the path of the processes of cognition and communication by the metaphorical languages of rhetoric and rhetorical argumentation open to various conceits. It is these hindrances that Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam, had in mind when he warned against the idols of the marketplace arising from the “intercourse and association of men with each other.” In his introductory narrative to the *Discourse on the Method*, René Descartes denies that rhetoric should have any role in the education of a young man or in the process of arriving at the truth:

“I placed a great value on eloquence, and I was in love with poetry, but I thought that both of them were gifts given to the mind rather than fruits of study. Those who have the most powerful reasoning and who direct their thoughts best in order to make them clear and intelligible can always convince us best of what they are proposing, even if they speak only the language of Lower Brittany [language of uneducated people, JK] and have never learned rhetoric. And those who possess the most pleasant creative talents and who know how to express them with the most adornment and smoothness cannot help being the best poets, even though the art of poetry is unknown to them.”² Descartes’ statement is an anticipation of the revolt represented by romanticism in art one hundred years later, a revolt directed against the binding norms of discourse which can be memorized, against the norms which tie down the originality and unique character of an individual and his style.

The relationship between rhetoric and philosophy in particular was subject not only to numerous antagonisms throughout the course of history, but it also experienced transformations in how it was regarded by society. Henri-Irénée Marrou, a French historian focusing on European education, characterized its beginnings in this way: “The study of rhetoric dominant in all western cultures until that time had begun as the core of ancient Greek education and culture. In ancient Greece, the study of ‘philosophy’, represented by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, for all its subsequent fecundity, was a relatively minor element in the total Greek culture, never competitive with

rhetoric either in the number of its practitioners or in its immediate social effects.”³

We can find several reasons why, from the first half of the 17th century, rationalism and enlightenment led, intentionally or subconsciously, first to limiting the influence of rhetoric and later to its almost total demise:

(a) The character of expert and scientific, legal and political speeches changed. Knowledge and conviction were no longer born in arguments, nor were they based in the confrontation of alternative opinions and the ability to convince the counterpart, but instead it was formed as a result of a train of thought, which was based on rational judgement or the analysis of proven empirical facts. The imagery arising from the application of rhetorical rules and the dependence on canonical models gave way to the clarity and sobriety of style. This resulted in the emergence of new stylistic models. Science was characterized by an increasing optimistic belief in the unlimited nature of human cognition.

(b) Rhetoric’s decline can also be attributed to book printing and a general growth in literacy. As the market for books, encyclopaedias and specialized journals grew and as the role of human memory and spoken language in official contact declined, rhetoric began to drown in a sea of printer’s ink.

(c) Originality became newly valued, and came to replace the *imitatio* method, imitating recognized models. Romanticism created a demand for stylistic innovation in fiction based on the innovative rendering of individual experiences. Science, on the other hand, was marked by efforts to form one’s own perception of the world based on empirically collected material or on one’s own logical assessment. At the beginning of the 16th century in his *Il Principe* (The Prince), the Renaissance politician Niccolò Machiavelli intentionally digressed from the established rhetorical model of the moralizing “mirrors for rulers” (*speculum regis*) and, with mathematical precision elaborated a strategy for political struggle consistently aiming to achieve a set goal: a *per fas et nefas* victory, a victory by any and every means.

(d) The unity of the international community of learned men fell apart. The role of Latin was replaced by national languages, which gradually developed their own refined and literary forms. An international version of Latin was no longer the ideal of the time, which was instead represented by the distinctiveness of many languages and many cultures. It was also through legislation that national languages gradually took up their place in official public communications. Any attempt to refute this development by constructing artificial languages for international communication failed.

The return to a single language of international communication did not occur until the second half of the 20th century, when this role was assumed by English.

(c) The birth of historical and comparative linguistics shifted researchers' interest towards the study of the inner laws of language development, primarily in phonetics and grammar. The rise of Indo-European studies and historical-comparative linguistics as a new philological discipline striving to discover the oldest documented or reconstructed stages of the linguistic system caused a revolution in learning about language and its laws. The regard for the functionally differentiated linguistic discourse as the main object of rhetoric began to disappear and an attempt to create an exact description of the language took the place of older, normative approaches. As rhetoric was fundamentally more limited to a set of practical advice and instructions, it ceased to be considered an equal component of philological research and gradually lost its scientific ambitions.

It was philosophers in particular who reacted to this development. John Locke called rhetoric a "powerful instrument of error and deceit," while Kant criticized it for manipulation and rejected it as a tool for critical communication, which was the mission of an independent thinker. Leibnitz and his followers set out the idea of an artificial language, freed from the temptations of rhetorical imagery, polysemy and manipulation.

The above causes, which originated during the Enlightenment, have, however, begun to lose their power since the second half of the 20th century and, a movement accelerating at the threshold of the third millennium even to the extent that each has been transforming into its very opposite. In this context, the world marked by postmodern discourse has been witnessing the return of rhetoric. There are several reasons:

(a) Specialized discourse has become "rhetorized": it has been losing its impartiality and objectivity, and reflects an effort to understand the openness and plurality of the world, to express a personal attitude and a personal responsibility for the problem being addressed. Science has been increasingly lending more legitimacy to questions with alternative solutions which are intelligible only within their respective contexts or paradigms. The conviction that scientific knowledge's objectivity is an illusion has been gaining strength. It is remarkable that this view is also held by representatives of natural and physical sciences, not merely by those in social sciences. The role of axiological statements, paradoxes, chance, probability, alternatives and respect for different world views has been growing. There is a new phe-

nomenon: an individual, subjective scientific style which intends not only to describe and analyze, but also to persuade on issues which lack a definitive solution. This style is also often conditioned by the nature of the language, national traditions and culture. In a direct continuation of the paradigms of ancient rhetoric, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is the person who formed the modern roots of this pluralist perception of reality.

(b) Thanks to television and numerous new information technologies, public communication at the end of the century rediscovered the role of oral discourse. The primary form of public communication by scientists, politicians, and representatives of the economic and financial spheres is usually spoken; after all, the speed and readiness of the computer and communications technologies have, to a large extent, erased the traditional differences between the written and spoken language. As was the case of the audience at Athen's Agora or the Roman Forum, modern TV viewers can also register every gesture, every tone of voice employed by the people who speak to them, wanting to persuade them, win their support, make the viewers remember them.

(c) Intertextuality has become an important value: both authors and interpreters of artistic or political texts use quotes, paraphrases, intentional and unconscious allusions to other texts. Communication is thus enriched by another type of context awareness: interdiscursivity, in other words, associating texts with established genre or stylistic models, simultaneously in imitation and disruption of traditional means of expression. *Imitatio*, an ancient rhetorical principle, has thus been revived and has become both a communication device and strategy.

(d) Media, particularly television channels, have created a new type of supranational auditorium bringing events, whose consequences may affect the viewers at any moment, closer. As was the case of ancient Latin or Greek, within this community there are also tendencies strengthening the role of languages utilized in international communication; the status of English has been growing stronger in reflection of the world's increasing globalization.

(e) The renaissance of rhetoric has also been supported by the turn towards communication in contemporary linguistics. Language is now more often being studied in pragmatic, social, logical, psychological and philosophical contexts. It was the importance of context that was anticipated by rhetoric's accentuation of mastering the mutually permeating disciplines of the *trivium*.

It is therefore not surprising that the expression “rhetoric,” with its many and often contradictory meanings, has lately been spreading quickly through the languages of science, mass media, and everyday speech. There is a growing and legitimate concern that every person understands and judges this discipline differently. We can hear voices calling for modern rhetoric, in terms of language, ideas and ethics, to be elevated to a more sophisticated form in public speeches and communication in general, but also those that reject rhetoric as a synonym for ballast, bamboozling, insincerity or intentionally false argumentation.

This discrepancy in the perception of rhetoric is partially due to its status in the history of European education. The ability to communicate efficiently was always perceived as an indispensable part of a person’s and citizen’s education, as the necessary first stage of mastering practical and theoretical knowledge, as part of an active as well as contemplative life. However, rhetoric as a school discipline often succumbed to routine and pedantry. These increased particularly in periods in which freedom of speech as an inseparable attribute of democracy and a precondition of a statesman’s activity and a citizen’s involvement had to give way to the rigid ceremoniousness of speeches strengthening the idea of the unchangeability of the social order.

The contemporary renaissance of rhetoric as a discipline whose content and terminology have been preserved without major change for over two and a half thousand years seems surprising. This is principally attributable to the fact that it has been inspired not only by the effort to better understand the history of human communication, but also by the content of the disciplines which are predominantly related to the modern development of society, such as the theory of communication, media studies, marketing, persuasive strategies, advertising, argumentation theory, speech act analysis and others.

We have mentioned the causes for this renaissance, which can also be seen in the rapidly growing bibliography of the discipline. We should add the topicality of the issue and the historically preconditioned transformation of rhetoric’s central theme: speech, *oratio*. Not only speech as the generally understood result of the human ability to communicate and achieve understanding, but also as a reflection of particular conditions which determine the quality and efficiency of an utterance as to its content and function, and further with respect to the situation in which a communication act is taking place. In accordance with the content of the fundamental summarizing work of ancient rhetorical culture, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, these

conditions also include the personality of the orator (his knowledge, experience, talent, psyche, moral qualities), the nature of the audience, the system of language and argumentation means the speaker has at his disposal and, last but not least, functional and thematic differences between individual types of speech, be they to inform (*docere*) or amuse (*delectare*) the listener and thus inspire an action or a particular stance (*movere*).

Ancient society perceived rhetoric primarily as an art (*technē* in Greek, *ars* in Latin) which taught, according to a systematic set of rules or based on an imitation of classical models (*mimēsis*, *imitatio*), everyone, even those who were not endowed with a natural talent for speech-making, to be successful in expressing their opinions in a given situation, whether at an advisory assembly, in court or on other occasions. The dominant position of rhetoric in the education of a citizen as a fundamental part of ancient cultural heritage, however, also places the system of rhetorical knowledge not only among practical skills, but also among scientific disciplines. From its very outset, rhetoric acted as *technē*, experience acquired through practice, and *empeiria*, routine, but also as an important element in the effort to learn about and explain reality as *epistēmē*, *scientia*. That ranked it, along with grammar and logic (dialectics), among the necessary preconditions for the study of philosophy and, later, theology. Quintilian characterized rhetoric as *bene dicendi scientia* (further specifying *ad persuadendum accommodare dicere*), that is, as a purpose “to speak in order to persuade.” The word *bene*, meaning “well,” expresses a relatively free choice of stylistic means, compared to grammar, where the adverb *recte*, “correctly,” in the definition *recte dicendi scientia*, clearly aims at the criterion of language correctness: without stylistic and rhetorical licenses. Unlike other scientific disciplines, rhetoric was closer to the sphere of practical activities; it did not only focus on a didactically oriented description and explanation of its main components: language correctness, style, methods of logical argumentation, psychology of the speaker and listeners, etc., but also on contemplation and practical instruction. These were related to many things, including the method of teaching rhetorical skills, the ethics of persuasion, cultivating political and judicial practice.

An effort to explain what rhetoric in fact includes, what is the scope of its knowledge and what is its purpose within the former system of basic liberal arts (trivium), does not always lead to univocal results. This is primarily due to the changeability of rhetoric in periods of social development, from its outset in the ancient *polis* to the present day. In antiquity, in the medieval

educational system and, with even more intensity, in the spiritual life of the European Renaissance, rhetoric was a central element in the education of a young man and future intellectual, it assumed a prominent position in the theory and practice of preaching and also served as a key to interpreting biblical texts and fiction. It was Cartesian philosophy and, in the arts, the romantics' revolt against the binding norms of the style of the time that brought about its decline and later its almost complete demise.

There are several other reasons why it is difficult to define the content and meaning of rhetoric more precisely. Their source must be sought in the controversies surrounding the ethical qualification, and often also disqualification, of the discipline which, rather than striving for truthfulness, focused on the probable and trustworthy in the communicated matter, on the orator's artistry in being able to take advantage of the immediate situation to persuade listeners and influence their opinion. In the sense of Plato's interpretation of sophism, expressed primarily in *Gorgias*, rhetoric is understood as *peithous demiurgos*, the creator and confirmer of the conviction, and its main role is *psychagogia tis dia logōn*, the ability to lead (but also mislead) human souls by means of words. This is also a source of conflict between philosophy and rhetoric, the conflict that Plato raised throughout his oeuvre. The more philosophy focused on metaphysical questions and eternal and unchangeable certainties, the more dramatic the controversy between philosophy and rhetoric became. The paradox of the ethical dilemma of rhetoric lies in the fact that the vast majority of authors of books on rhetoric and rhetoric textbooks repeatedly emphasized the fact that an orator cannot survive without reliable knowledge of the matter he was to talk about. Philosophical, dialectical knowledge and high ethical standards thus appear to be necessary preconditions for producing an effective speech. On the other hand, even philosophers were aware of the fact that without attention to their own language and their manner of speaking, in other words to rhetoric, they could not effectively convey the results of their learning. Thus, among philosophers we can find both opponents of rhetoric, such as Plato, Descartes, Locke and Kant, as well as thinkers willing to admit it was a useful or neutral tool for communication, such as Aristotle, Vico, Nietzsche, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Bělohradský. After a firm rejection of rhetoric as a dangerous weapon of sophist persuasion, Plato himself was willing to admit, in *Phaedrus*, to the possibility of real rhetoric, of philosophers' rhetoric which would talk to a human soul through clear and perfect expositions on the just, the beautiful and the good; these expositions should,

according to Plato, be based directly on the orator's responsibility for his words and acts.

An ethical dilemma also arose in the relation between rhetoric and theology. Many Church Fathers, educated in the spirit of classical Greek and Latin learning, painfully, even existentially, realized that this education and culture was pagan and hostile. In this lies the dichotomy between their proclamations against rhetoric and the need, which they plainly acknowledged, to use this knowledge in a preacher's practice and for exegetical exposition. This need was often accompanied by an admiration for both beloved classical authors and for the power and appeal of their words. The controversy over whether or not the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, should be included in the list of the canonical classical writers recognized as either rhetorical or linguistic and stylistic models, affected most Christian authors in the 4th and 5th centuries. This controversial approach is particularly symptomatic of St. Augustin, his contemporaries and close followers, but it also appears much later. Even Comenius in his text *A Report and Lesson on Preaching*, whose content and organization reveal consistent knowledge of ancient models, outwardly turns away from rhetoric: "And so that who wants to speak from God's place shall not use his own, or Cicero's, or some courtly words, but words of the Holy Spirit."⁴

When speaking about the connections between rhetoric and ethics, we must not neglect rhetoric's role in achieving social consensus. This role had a necessary precondition: the freedom of speech granting every citizen the right to participate in public life and defend himself in court. Ancient rhetoric is rooted in Athenian democracy and in the political and judicial practice of republican Rome. Consul Crassus, the main orator in Cicero's dialogue *De oratore* says: "nothing seems to me a nobler ambition than to be able to hold by your eloquence the minds of men, to captivate their wills, to move them to and fro in whatever direction you please. This art of all others has ever found its fullest development in every free community, and more especially in states enjoying peace and tranquillity, and has ever exercised a dominant influence" (I.8). Any suppression of the freedom of speech led either to the end of rhetoric or to its transformation into a set of instructions, into superficial speech mannerism without much content.

In our effort to define rhetoric in this opening chapter, we naturally cannot avoid a search for a satisfactory reply to the highly topical question of whether the subjects of this discipline are orally delivered speeches exclusively or whether its rules apply across the entire range of persuasive com-

munication, spoken and written, or even discourses carried out exclusively in writing, such as diplomatic correspondence, historical documents, genres of an artistic nature and others. The study of circumstances which led to the birth of rhetoric as well as the study of the oldest classical texts leads us to the conclusion that the beginnings of rhetoric are associated with the era of Homer's Greece, with its exclusively oral culture, but that it soon also included the written word. When linking Athenian rhetoric with the practical activities of logographers, people who would compose speeches for their clients (or even wrote them out entirely) and then helped them to memorize the speech and practice its delivery, there is no reason to think that rhetoric would focus solely on spoken language.

This development is to a much larger extent linked with how Hellenistic authors of rhetoric examined not only the advisory, judicial and celebratory discourses, which were primarily shaped to be delivered orally, but also the artistic, epistolary, historiographic, philosophical and scientific ones. The gradual transition from the typically spoken, paratactically arranged sentence units, which were easier to remember, to a more demanding syntactic structure which reveals the possible existence of a primary written model is evident in the linguistic means. The study of ancient and later sources reveals that many speeches by famous orators of Greek antiquity which have been preserved in written form were never publicly delivered and thus were intentionally created to be works of literature. Isocrates's *Panathenaicus* was said to have taken three years to write, while the completion of his *Panegyricus*, which was famous for its subtle argumentation and the elaborate rhythmic structure of the text, allegedly took ten years. However, records of preserved speeches must be generally understood as the outcome of later editing, either carried out by the author himself or someone else. Stenographical records of public speeches are somewhat more authentic. The history of shorthand mentions, for example, Marcus Tullius Tiro, Cicero's secretary, known for "Tironian notes." Even in this case, the original text was linguistically adjusted and these adjustments affected both the factual content and the stylistic effect of the speech.

Rhetoric became particularly closely connected with written texts at the peak of the Middle Ages, when it was called *ars dictaminis* and when private as well as official (diplomatic, in particular) correspondence was its subject. *Ars dictaminis* or the art of letter writing (from the Latin verb *dictare*, which means not only to dictate, but also to write and produce literary texts, cf. *dichten* in German) emerged in Italy (in Bologna and Monte Cassino) in the

12th and 13th centuries and became an essential part of instruction for church diplomats and the newly emerging city patriciate. The art of letter writing was also promoted by the Italian-born founder of the rhetorical tradition in the Czech Lands, Henricus of Isernia, at the end of the 13th century.

Our contemplations on rhetoric thus lead, in accord with the extant development which started in antiquity, to the gradually wider understanding of the discipline, whose demands accompany a learned person throughout his or her life and runs the full gamut of communication requirements. What we have left to think about is whether rhetoric focused exclusively on monologues (spoken or written) or whether it also included everyday dialogues. The suggestion to an answer can be found in Cicero's *De oratore*, in which one of the figures says: "[...] not to be always thinking of the forum, its courts of justice, public meetings, and senate, what greater enjoyment can there be in times of leisure, what greater intellectual treat than the brilliant discourse of a perfect scholar?" (I.8). Clearly, Cicero and many of his followers also cared for the cultivation of everyday language: *sermo*, conversation, which they distinguished from a speech intended for a wider public, and *contentio*, argument.

We may thus assume that in antiquity and in later authors, there was something that could be called *rhetorica sermonis*. Rhetoric textbooks which systematically adhere to the classical structure demonstrate that this indeed is the case. The unknown author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Rhetoric for Herennius) ascribes four properties to *sermo*: dignity (*dignitas*), clear explanation (*demonstratio*), ability to narrate (*narratio*) and facetiousness (*iocatio*). From the end of the 16th century, these very qualities were included in the education of noble ladies, who organized and cultivated conversation in the newly emerging salons. Generally speaking, with the exception of these rather general recommendations, the theme of private conversation defied systematic rhetorical codification in its very essence. According to Cicero, these conversations do not constitute the subject matter of rhetoric, but rather of ethics and an effort to achieve spiritual harmony and friendship between people. Speech (in the sense of *sermo*) is a natural ability, which distinguishes humans from animals, while cultivated speech, eloquence (*eloquentia*) is an extension of this, the result of systematic education and long-term cultivation. The personal character of private conversations did not exclude highly demanding themes, because after all dialogue, albeit naturally in the form of artistically treated fiction, has always been an important genre of artistic, philosophical, theological and scientific literature.